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IV.—*Observations on Plato's Cratylus.*

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The student of the science of language who wishes to take a comprehensive view of the theories advanced regarding it, cannot fail to take cognizance of Plato's writings as the earliest detailed embodiment of speculation and observation on this subject. Not but that among the predecessors of Plato and Socrates valuable suggestions on the nature of language were offered, but they were isolated flashes across the field of intellectual vision rather than systematic discussions; neither Herakleitos nor Parmenides formulated their inquiries in a manner calculated to emphasize distinctly the difference between thought and speech. Strange though it may seem, the Greek philosophers busied themselves considerably with hypotheses on the origin of the reasoning faculties, before they convinced themselves that the final results of such investigations must, of necessity, be futile, unless they attacked the problem of the origin of language, since language was the vehicle of reasoning, and thus the most essential characteristic of human kind. Plato's age was fully alive to this inquiry, and in the *Cratylus* we have by no means a tentative effort in this field of speculation, but a *résumé* of prevalent theories which a master in the art of dialectics sifts, indorses, modifies, or rejects. The very art of the writer, however, his consummate use of the various devices of oratory, satire, modest doubt, etc., have rendered a correct appreciation of his position all the more difficult, as we lack almost completely the evidence for the real opinions held by those philosophers whose views he introduces as foils for his argument.

Hence various modern writers on comparative philology have been able to interpret the position of Plato in consistency with their favorite theories, and the *Cratylus* has been represented as the precursor of those linguistic treatises that proclaim the study of language a physical science as well as of those that make it a historical science. One point we may lay down

even at this stage: Plato's *Cratylus*, whatever its object or tendency, cannot be disregarded in any discussion on the science of language; it forms the landmark around which the speculations of the ancients on the subject may be grouped. From Herder on through Schleiermacher, Ast, Steinhart, Benfey, Müller, Whitney, Steinthal, Geiger, down to the most recent expositor of these issues, Ludwig Noiré (*Ursprung der Sprache*), all seek to establish their relation to the Platonic dialogue; nay, the last-named philosopher, whose estimation of his own results is significantly presented in the sentence: "Thus language *must* have arisen; it *cannot* have arisen otherwise," finds in Plato's exposition the germs of most advanced modern thought, as of Schopenhauer, and a series of linguistic and philosophical discoveries that thenceforward became an heir-loom to all later speculative research. Now, notwithstanding the discrepancy of opinion as to the ulterior significance of the dialogue, it is a fair question, Are there not a number of points, generally adopted by all commentators, from which a consistent interpretation ought to be possible? A review of the various discussions on the *Cratylus*, casually undertaken by me, has convinced me that opinions are still almost hopelessly divergent on the problem proposed in the dialogue, and that yet there have appeared two discussions that merit a more thorough consideration than they have received for their bearing upon the main issue; I refer to Benfey's "Ueber die Aufgabe des Platonischen Dialogs *Cratylus*," and Dr. Herm. Schmidt's "Plato's *Cratylus*, im Zusammenhange dargestellt." The reasons for this neglect seem to me to constitute a special plea in their favor; neither of them seeks to establish a relationship between the *Cratylus* and the general system of Platonic philosophy. I urge this as a point in their favor, for the much-vexed question of the Platonic philosophy, with its numerous subsidiary issues, is too apt to bias the judgment on the import of the single dialogue; and it seems to me incompatible with the nature and purposes of these dialogues, that they should all represent one and the same line of thought, uninfluenced by the exigencies of a conversational exposition. Two circumstances that have, respec-

tively, been prejudicial to these essays in the eyes of the German philological world will not influence our estimate of them. Dr. Schmidt's essay does not present a connected theory of the meaning of the *Cratylus*, but analytically takes up the various passages, and, disregarding the final result, discusses fairly and acutely the interpretation which is presumably the best. Whilst Schmidt then has no special theory to advance, Benfey, who *does* look to the claims of the work as a philosophic whole, too modestly pleads ignorance as a metaphysician, and as an exponent of Platonic phraseology. Here, then, has been found the vulnerable point by the specialist-critics; and though it must be admitted that now and then there occurs an impossible rendering of some minor passage in the Greek, his sound qualities as a linguist more than compensate for this deficiency.

To those parts of Schmidt's work that do not tend to elucidate the questions which Benfey has also treated, nothing more than a passing notice can be given; let it suffice that many a passage, involving knotty, grammatical construction, has been capitally set forth by Schmidt. On the main issues of the dialogue, Plato's opinion of the origin and formation of language, the contributions of the two writers seem to me specially valuable.

In this direction Benfey has developed in succinct argument a point that is particularly timely just now, when other German critics, like Schaarschmidt and Krohn, apply the crucial test to every one of the dialogues, and attempt to deny the Platonic origin of the majority. If Plato is not the author, he argues, it would remain for Schaarschmidt to prove that the dialogue is of much later origin, the product of a time, when the study of language was more thoroughly developed, say, the Aristotelian; and as this can never be done, the inherent excellence of the treatise as the oldest comprehensive work on the subject of linguistics remains unimpaired; the question of Plato's authorship is, under all circumstances, secondary to the internal consistency of the views expressed. Let it not be supposed that the treatment of this question of authenticity is a purely speculative one. Schaarschmidt's

criticisms on so-called inconsistencies in the Cratylus must stand or fall, in several instances, with the accuracy of translation in a given passage. Thus, when he ascribes to the author of the Cratylus the assertion that in a sentence each word embodies a judgment upon an object, and that, if a statement is false, every single word contained in it must also be false, a careful study of the previous passage would have led to a more rational conclusion. With Schaarschmidt, many others err in trying to ascertain what they call "den verhüllten Sinn"; this license once granted, the way is open to various mystifying interpretations, and the natural course of reasoning may as well be abandoned. No more striking instance of this warping of the logical faculties could be found than Steinthal's exposition of the object of this dialogue in his "Geschichte der Sprachwiss. bei den Griechen und Römern." "The first part of the dialogue, where Plato proves that a name is the sound-complement of the fundamental idea of the name (die Ausführung der Idee des Namens im Laute), and supports the view with the greatest sincerity (mit seinem Herzblute)," all this serious exposition we are, according to Steinthal, to regard as not serious, and in the famous second or etymological part whatever is sportive, conceals under it the reverse of sportive observation, is, in fact, exceedingly sober. Now, whither will such methods of interpretation lead, if, without any clue in the writings before us, such renderings are possible? But why are such *tours de force* ascribed to Plato? Because, though anxious to establish a science of etymology, he has so little confidence in the correctness of his derivations that he finds it safest to ridicule them all, good, bad, and indifferent. Stranger still, however, is it that these philosophical critics have generally failed to observe carefully the exact meaning of the technical terms used; and it is peculiarly meritorious that Benfey has established these conceptions beyond a doubt.

The question whether Plato considered language to have originated and developed φύσει or θέσει, for which latter word ξυνθήκη is frequently used in the Cratylus, could not be answered satisfactorily, so long as it was not definitely under-

stood that *ξυνοθήκη* has varying technical and popular significations. Benfey has carefully discriminated its three respective significations, as (1) "an arbitrary agreement, unlimited in every respect, perfectly optional," (2) "the agreement or accord of a number of persons, bound by natural ties," and (3) "such agreement as has become conventional," and we recognize the vast difference between the *ξυνοθήκη* or accord of society, by means of which the originally manifest meaning of a word is retained, notwithstanding the changes and modifications in etymological value, and that arbitrary *ξυνοθήκη* which *e.g.* decides upon certain sound-combinations as proper designations of various numerals. Jowett recognizes the difficulty, and in his latest edition renders it often by "convention and agreement." Plato's time is preëminently the period of transition to a special philosophical terminology, and works in which this process of evolution is being perfected, require a more faithful interpretation than others with a fixed technical vocabulary. In deciding these questions, the aid of kindred sciences is often very desirable, and that were an unworthy sense of exclusiveness that would forego the information likely to be attained from such a source. Not unconsciously, however, is this evolution of terms brought about. Plato's tendency toward nice distinctions appears, for instance, from a survey of the verbs he employs in the sense of "to mean"; and one cannot fail to notice with what consideration for the requisite shade of meaning he employs *νοεῖν*, *ἠγγεῖσθαι*, *λέγειν*, *ὀνομάζειν*, *καλεῖσθαι*, *εἶναι*, *βούλεσθαι*, *δηλοῦν*, *μηνύειν*, *σημαίνειν*, *ἀπεικάζειν*, *μμεῖσθαι*, *φαίνεσθαι ἀπείκασμα*, *ἔοικεν*. A similar definite conception of Plato's leading terms seems to me an absolute necessity, where he himself has not made matters as plain as in the instance just quoted; *ὄνομα* and *ῥῆμα* are the veriest by-words of the dialogue, and yet the translations given by Schleiermacher, Steinhart-Müller, and others are ambiguous, since they are confused by the later application of the word by grammarians, with whom *ὄνομα* = noun, *ῥῆμα* = verb. That *ὄνομα* here means "word" in its wider sense, and not the noun-forms merely, is of no slight importance in the consideration of the main question, for, if we admit that the verbs

are also *ὀνόματα* (and this has, I believe, been unhesitatingly conceded to Benfey), we are forced to admit that *ῥήματα* can no longer be rendered, as all translators have done, by “verb,” that the phrase *ὀνόματα καὶ ῥήματα* would be tautological, and that *ῥήμα* must indicate an intermediate stage between the “word” and the “sentence” in a logical and grammatical sense; the logical sense being differentiated from the grammatical in this fashion, that the same word may in turn serve as an *ὄνομα* or *ῥήμα*, according as it is accepted as an appellation, or conceived of as a condensation of a logical phrase. So *βουλή* is the *ὄνομα* to *βολή* (shot) as *ῥήμα* and if *βολή* can be analyzed still farther, it becomes the *ὄνομα* to another *ῥήμα*. Benfey contends, and not unfairly, that the later meaning of *ῥήμα* (= verb) comes more naturally from this original application, that the *ῥήμα* contains that part of the sentence which is independently intelligible. Not only is Plato’s usage of philosophical terminology often the cause of mistaken conclusions, but the instances are not infrequent where a modern investigator will be oblivious of the development and growth of certain ideas since Plato’s time. How else could a distinguished scholar like Steinthal sneer at John Stuart Mill’s statement that “words are important for the comprehension of things,” and identify this with Cratylus’s statement that “a knowledge of the *names* of things involves a knowledge of the things themselves,” seeing that Cratylus refers to the original physical nature of words in which he presumes to find a genuine reflection of the objects they refer to, whilst Mill has in mind the logical meaning that has gradually developed out of a word. Benfey and Schmidt, whilst cognizant of such principles as have here been stated, have proceeded to the solution of other difficult questions by throwing upon the words involved the light of comparative grammar.—A link in the argument, so urges Schaarschmidt, is wanting in the celebrated passage (388 B.) where, after speaking of the functions of various instruments, the shuttle, the awl, etc., Socrates recurs to the name as an instrument, and draws analogous conclusions. Let us examine for a moment the text and Jowett’s translation, which is no stronger here than any of

the other versions. Socrates asks: *κερκίζοντες δὲ τί ὀρῶμεν; οὐ τὴν κρόκην καὶ τοὺς στήμονας συγκεχυμένους διακρίνομεν;* "What do we do, when we weave? Do we not separate or disengage the warp from the woof?" and shortly afterward, *ὀργάνῳ ὄντι τῷ ὀνόματι ὀνομάζοντες τί ποιῶμεν;* Hermogenes: *οὐκ ἔχω λέγειν.* And Socrates: *Ἄρ' οὖν διδάσκομέν τι ἀλλήλους;* "Do we not teach one another something?" Now with such a translation there is an unwarranted transition from *διακρίνομεν* to *διδάσκομεν*. An analysis of the verb *διδάσκω* shows, however, that in its primitive root-form *δα* we have the true signification of *separation* which underlies even the forms *δαίω* "to burn" and *δαίνυμι* "to entertain as guest," and it is in accord with the etymological character of the whole dialogue that Socrates should thus delicately make the logical transition. On the other hand, I do not believe that it will be easy to find *one* word which in the translation would carry the same suggestiveness with it, and yet not transcend the scope of meaning, usually ascribed to *διδάσκειν*. Of the salient points in the dialogue which, stripped of the dialectic form, betoken a substantial knowledge of certain principles, current now among students of comparative grammar, Benfey has made an interesting list, and without giving way to the enthusiasm usually connected with such observations, has also dropped various claims that had been previously made for Plato's linguistic insight. Among these prominent points I single out the following: "that word would be most correct which would contain completely its etymological elements;" again, "words are overlaid by the addition or stripping off or twisting of letters for the sake of euphony"; "onomatopoeitic origin of words is to be disregarded almost completely." With the acknowledgment of Plato's grammatical insight must be coupled, however, the warning that whether in sport or ignorance, or from other motives, the illustrations of these principles are in many cases untrustworthy.

Have Benfey and Schmidt, you will probably ask, taken any new position on the central question, that of the purpose of the *Cratylus*? I may as well state that I look upon Benfey's judgment in this question as the most valuable recent contri-

bution to its solution. All preceding commentators, from Proclus to the moderns, have assumed as Plato's purpose the treatment of the question, "Has language, as it exists, come into being *φύσει* or *θέσει*?" and have, with an expenditure of considerable ingenuity maintained the one or other issue. What curious methods of procedure were necessary to make Plato a doctrinarian on either side of this question! That Socrates is represented as finding fault with the views of both Cratylus and Hermogenes, the typical expositors of the two opinions, was undeniable. Now in the one of these critical analyses, Socrates, so say Steinthal and others, does not mean what he says; he criticizes, and yet at heart supports a certain view. Whence this knowledge of the attitude of Socrates? The solution is simple; not from the work itself can such inconsistency be gathered, but from the desire of the modern theorist to confirm his experiences from this ancient product of literature. Others, less metaphysical, find Plato's individual opinion in the golden mean between the opposing views. But for this intervening opinion no statement can be found in the Cratylus. On the contrary, the very supporters of this theory confess, as Schleiermacher does, that Plato's language indicates that he cannot give satisfactory account of his opinion; and thus, also, honest doubts as to the cogency of his own opinions seem to have presented themselves to Deuschle in his work "Die Platonische Sprachphilosophie" who confesses that to himself it is not clear, how in the concrete application *φύσις* and *θέσις* can correspond respectively to *ἔθος* (custom) and *ἔνθίκη* (agreement). I cannot understand why a point of primary significance has not been urged as the final answer to these speculative fancies; that the language of Socrates, naturally interpreted, proves him to be opposed to the views of both Cratylus and Hermogenes is indisputable. Again, if Socrates would wish us to accept the reverse of what he says, the language with its facile particles would afford unmistakable proofs of such intentions; why, then, this vacillation instead of a frank confession of the situation?

Neither *φύσει* nor *θέσει* can language, as it exists, be proved

correct; in other words, language, as actually used, neither conforms in its origin and growth to the natural meaning of words, nor to the agreement of mankind regarding them. An ideal language only might be constructed conformably to these principles; in it the veritable *ῥηθότης ὀνομάτων* would have to be sought; whatever correctness of appellation actual language shows forth, is purely accidental, is, as it were, a reflection from the world of ideas; and yet, it is desirable to extract from language, as it exists, whatever traces of systematic development can be definitely established; hence Plato enters as far as possible into an analysis of existing language, and scrutinizes its laws. In seeking for analogies to this method of treatment, Benfey has, strange to say, overlooked that Platonic work which is most strikingly similar in conception and execution, more so than the *Politeia* and *Politikos* that he mentions. I have in mind the *Νόμοι*, a treatise far more comprehensive, it is true, than the *Cratylus*, but equally impelled by the desire to extract an ideal code of laws from the existing and opposite systems, prevailing in Greece. Not for a moment can Plato have assumed that such a code would take effect without extensive modifications and adaptation to the limiting circumstances of time and people, nor, I take it, was that at all his purpose, but rather to evolve from imperfect and contradictory methods something higher and consistent in itself. And such is the case with language.

Under this assumption, however, it must be evident to every student of Plato, that the relation of the second part of the dialogue, the so-called etymological part, must be established with respect to Benfey's theory. Views have diverged widely respecting its importance from Dionysius of Halicarnassus who considers it the cardinal point, as the additional super-scription he gives to the dialogue: *περὶ ἐτυμολογίας* proves, to Schleiermacher, who looks upon it as "Nebensache," and with whom many others fail to find any purpose in this exposition. That Steinthal alone had endeavored to fathom this curious mixture of gravity and irony has already been referred to, but his reasoning has been shown to be exceedingly faulty. According to Benfey it is not only no minor part that has

assumed in consequence of Socrates' tendency to ridicule the etymological fashions of the day undue proportions, but it is a legitimate outgrowth and further exposition of the first portion of the work. Ὁρθότης ὀνομάτων he has there defined as existing, when name and object mutually suggest and cover each other. To the practical illustration of this mutual kinship he devotes himself in the second part, but language, as it actually exists, bristles with imperfections, and hence the application of his principles does not result in a consistent series of etymological analyses. Many absurd conceptions obtrude themselves, but it is to be remembered that the sense of the ludicrous is not what he panders to; it is rather the weakness of language, unphilosophical as it needs must be, that Socrates demonstrates in this extensive series of etymologies. The sense of proportion that Plato elsewhere displays so uniformly, could never have permitted him to ignore the limits within which ridicule proves effective; so prominent a part as this second must have served some higher purpose; and if Benfey's efforts had succeeded in establishing this point merely, his treatise on the Cratylus would seem to me a noteworthy performance, worthy of general recognition and study.
